

## A PERSPECTIVE ON THE TEXT

It is tempting to regard Louis Nowra's play *Così* as a perfect allegory of the Australian theatre. The play's metaphoric force stems from the highly recognisable comic situation: a group of mentally disturbed performers led by an inexperienced director attempt to stage one of the classics of European high art in a burnt out theatre for an audience composed of similarly disturbed and unstable patients. Yet the play is not merely some type of elaborate 'in-joke' intended to comment on the absurdity of producing high art in a philistine environment, although this satirical comment is evident at many points in the play.

Nowra exposes the experience felt by many practitioners of the arts in Australia. That working in this domain must feel like being confined in a distinctly separate institution, cut off from the more vital and popular currents of Australian society, a society that in many respects is oblivious to the importance or necessity of such work. Using the dramatic metaphor of a mental hospital, Nowra expresses the intensity of feeling that originates with the sense of working in an enclosed environment, yet attempting to create something that has universal relevance. This is where the play makes a significant comment on the social location of the arts in Australia.

That high art has often seemed cut off from the broader mainstream of Australian life is a commonplace assumption; cultural forms such as opera or the fine arts or literature are viewed as less compelling forms of 'native' cultural expression than the more obviously 'popular' forms such as sport, where the national identity has seemed to find its true expression. That Nowra stages the action of the play within the confines of an emblematically 'closed world' such as a mental hospital sets the terms for a critical commentary on the nature of how art is produced and received in this country. While a very funny play, *Così* has some extremely serious, even grim observations to make about the role of the arts in a society that has frequently appeared content to allow them to be cultivated in some exclusive space, detached from the social body at large.

This point constitutes the play's central dramatic structure. Lewis the novice director, who appears personally aimless, particularly when contrasted with his friends and contemporaries such as the student activists Nick and Lucy, retreats to what might seem the relative safety of an institution amidst the turbulence of the anti war protest and the more general spirit of social change that prevails in the early seventies. Lewis is in retreat, but from what? He has directed plays while at university, another 'enclosed' world, but while his girlfriend and best mate have plunged into the wider world of moratoriums, media celebrity and radical politics, all of which constitute the necessary preconditions for later career success as evidenced in Lewis's closing speech, Lewis himself seems more at home among the misfits, the mentally ill and the addicted. This is the environment in which he has chosen to work and to create art.

Nowra invests Lewis's choice with a great deal of symbolism. Doug, the pyromaniac, yearns to experience the liberation he imagines is burning outside the walls of the hospital and cannot fathom why Lewis has chosen to work with a group of mental patients in such a restricted world. Lewis's own reasons only become clear as the play progressively reveals his defining characteristics. He is a compassionate and

thoughtful young person who is constitutionally unsuited to the political bravado that defines a character such as Nick. Lewis is also a young director who clearly understands the value of staging a Mozart opera for the benefit of a cast of patients in a mental hospital. Against the demands of his friends Lewis chooses Mozart over Brecht, the institution over the streets, anonymity over notoriety. Lewis also makes a deliberate choice of art over the fleeting satisfactions of propaganda and political correctness.

Nowra's is not a morbid or ironically inward looking commentary on the role of the arts in Australia. *Così* is a light hearted piece, at turns extremely funny, loaded with pointed one liners that exploit the local taste for black humour (a prime example of this is Doug's extended account of what led to his committal in the hospital). Through the character of Roy, Nowra brilliantly lampoons the ossified pretensions of the cultural establishment. Roy speaks with a world-weary familiarity with the inevitable disappointments of working in the 'theatre' when one has a transcendent vision that others simply cannot recognise or understand. As the play's most memorable and unique character, Roy is the source of innumerable satirical barbs that target the very introversion of the cultural establishment that has led to its assumption of superiority or elevation over the uncultured masses. His seemingly 'exorbitant' artistic tastes in theatre, his unbridled ambitions that mock the figure of the theatrical impresario or auteur and his blindness to the glaringly obvious limitations of his circumstances, not to mention his relentless denigration of having to suffer the indignity of working with 'amateurs', all combine to create an extraordinarily vivid portrait of what it means to be a 'cultural producer' in Australia. Roy embodies the challenges that face artists in this country, constantly reminded of their marginality and irrelevance, yet having to sustain a belief in the transcendent value of their vision, to locate some deep subterranean source of inspiration that can nourish their work. Roy's many outrageous jibes, slanders and allegations, usually with Lewis as the butt of his jokes have an undeniable comic impact that is largely for entertainment value but his role acquires an increasingly poignant, even melancholy, tone as the play unfolds.

The staging of a performance of Mozart within the confines of a hospital for the mentally ill dramatises the larger situation of artistic production in a society that prefers to limit and regulate the circulation of particular cultural products. Nowra also confronts the hoary shibboleth of the cultural cringe in his play, the notion that anything artistic produced in this country must be inherently inferior. Nowra exposes how disabling and disempowering this condition has been, and through the transformations experienced by each of his cast Nowra makes an eloquent statement about the profound value of even the most apparently esoteric and privileged of cultural texts. Finally, the play makes an impassioned statement regarding the question of cultural inheritance. Who decides what comprises such an inheritance? Is Mozart part of the inheritance of ordinary Australians? Can it be seen as belonging to the most marginal individuals in our society? Who polices these boundaries and what values are therefore assumed about who is deserving of this inheritance and who is not? These are unsettling questions, but rather than weigh down the play they resonate for the audience after the end of the patients' performance.